

Parental involvement in choosing a university and a degree: a perspective from Saudi Arabia

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Background Information

Students planning to study for a degree in a university are considered to be mature people as they need to choose their subject according to what they want to do later on in life. This choice is likely to have a lasting effect on their future careers and lifestyles. While existing literature indicates that there are factors which determine these choices, the factors that different studies bring up seem to vary (Drewes, & Michael 2006; Maringe 2006; Wilkins, & Huisman 2011).

There are different cultural values and societal relationships in different regions of the world; students from some areas like Europe and North America tend to be more independent in their choice-making and take responsibility for their own lives, but students from Asian countries tend to be more dependent on their families for decision making (Iyengar et al 2009). Their choices are usually those imposed by their families, especially their parents. The choice of university is one of these decisions.

This study is based on Saudi Arabia as part of the Middle-east and it is part of larger research project about perception and positioning of business schools in Saudi Arabia. The research is carried out through semi structured interviews with several stakeholders of Business and Management education sector in Saudi Arabia. The main focus of the research is toward understanding the factors influencing students' choice of a university degree; the research specifically explores the family factor and how parents are involved in driving their sons and daughters towards a specific choice.

Theoretical approach and methodology adopted

In looking at parents' involvement, the study explored two different levels: First, formalities and regulations; second social power, specifically the role of the parents.

Analysing the formalities and regulations of different universities and higher education institutes confirmed that there are no formalities or regulations that compel the parents of students to involve themselves in the choices of the student. It is worth mentioning that there are some differences between males and females in this regard, as girls are asked to provide proof that their "official guardian" (usually "the father") has consented to their pursuing any kind of education or job (MOHE, 2014). In most cases this does not restrict females from studying and working as the consent is usually granted and serves only as formality to show that the proposed course of work/study is approved. There are few cases highlighted in media of girls who are restricted from carrying on with their studies and/or jobs. There are no official records or studies of the rejection ratio, but social media and public media can be used as indicators. When the issue is highlighted, it is usually about individual cases and never portrayed as a trend.

For exploring the social point of view, the researcher carried out several interviews with different stakeholders in business and management education in Saudi Arabia: students, parents, and

academics. Their perceptions about business and management education as an academic discipline were solicited. Students were mainly asked about why they chose to be in a business school and parents were asked about their views on their sons and daughters studying in a business school. Academics were asked about how business and management is positioned among other disciplines and how business schools relate to society.

The analysis of the interviews looked at : (1) that instances of parental involvement in choosing a course for a degree, (2) how the involvement came about, and most importantly (3) who initiated the involvement.

Indications from results

From the analysis of the interviews it was clear that parental involvement in driving student choice towards a university degree is a considerable factor. The involvement and influence of parents figured in many interviews in different instances. For example, have a preference for a particular university or discipline like medicine and engineering. Some universities were preferred for their general reputation rather than the reputation for excellence in a specific subject, while some subjects topped the preference list regardless of the universities or institutions that offer them. Both parents and students approached this matter in a similar manner.

Interviews with academics also showed a similar trend: during an interview, the dean of one of the top business schools in Saudi Arabia asked the researcher, as he studied in the institute in his undergraduate: "You came a distance city to study here. Why? Because your family trusted the university."

In another interview, a senior lecturer in Marketing in a leading business school revealed that a parent once came to his office to complain about his son choosing to study Marketing rather than Engineering.

Implications and future research

This research only looked at instances where parents influence on students' choices of university or subject was evident from discussions related to business or management education. Parents' involvement highlights the importance of understanding the motives behind student choice to study a specific discipline in a specific university. Universities need to study the factors that are expected to attract potential students like career prospects and ranking and confirm the strength of their influence on student choice. Other factors need to be explored in parallel like societal influence, location of the institution etc. Universities can then use these outcomes for different purposes like studying their impact on society and targeting potential students.

References

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